

need. The problem is that we really do not know, although comparative data from primatology (Yerkes 1943, Kroeber 1948: 27-29 and 60-61) clearly suggest that play belongs to the former category. If this is indeed the case it would imply that play is subject to the same degree of cultural influence, channeling, and socialization as are hunger, sex, and aggression, but can no more be fully obliterated than can these needs. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that this reasoning is correct, then the compensatory "escape" and "regressive" functions attributed to play by the authors noted above would not be at all unreasonable: play might well come to serve as an escape from adult reality in the same way that food sometimes serves as an escape from sexual anxiety or sex from food anxiety (Holmberg 1950). However, the point is that these are not the primary or typical functions of these needs, but secondary and defensive ones; although significant, they hardly comprise the necessary conditions for their being. If this approach is valid, we would be considerably wiser in our present state of knowledge (the Protestant Ethic and its intellectual extensions notwithstanding) to direct our attention to identifying the varying forms of play from culture to culture rather than to dwell on its secondary, compensatory functions.

Whatever its ultimate motivational basis, there is no doubting either the spontaneity or ingenuousness with which Bang Chaners turn social situations into occasions for play. For the most part they seem prompted in these situations by the simple desire to have a good time rather than to affect others in a socially pointed way, that is, their humor is not typically aimed at being sarcastic, didactic, or even exhibitionistic, although the person who excels at being funny is quickly recognized as such and is to an extent admired.⁷ There is, in the negative sense noted earlier, an element of interpersonal effect operating here: comedy is a technique which almost by definition reduces the potentiality for face-to-face conflict. However, the "villagers' play seems aimed primarily at satisfying personalistic function: their individual needs for pleasure and amusement.

The forms that these play activities take are numerous.⁸ Perhaps their

⁷ In the more explicitly institutionalized forms of comedy—*likas* (folk dramatic shows) or newspaper and magazine cartoons—these aims do come into play and often assume extreme, sometimes even biting, proportions. However, this is the comparatively safe world of theatre and "literature." Among themselves, in the world of face-to-face contact, villagers are considerably more gentle (or less sophisticated) and do not focus explicitly on such purposes.

⁸ We will be concerned primarily with the forms of play, not its content. For whatever reason, humor and comedy seem to be the last refuge of what is genuinely private in a culture. Intercultural translations may succeed in communicating the manifest content of another people's humor, but they so frequently miss its intent that the result is either perplexity or disappointment ("Yes, and what happens then?").

The dangers of trying to share humor interculturally were perhaps never brought home better than when I tried to get the villagers' reaction to a story that received

571 most subtle expression is in the marvelous word games that the villagers
 522 play. What is striking about these games from an analytic viewpoint is not
 524 so much that they are funny, but that villagers are continually attentive to
 opportunities for playing them, and actively try to structure situations
 along such lines. In a sense, they are not "games" at all but verbal asides
 that emerge spontaneously from the discourse of everyday contact, and
 which serve to make such contacts enjoyable. One form of word play is
 particularly popular. For the lack of a better term, it could be called "silent
 stinky pinky."⁹ Here two persons are chatting, and person A works into the
 conversation a statement that sounds completely innocuous. (A man, for
 example, says to a woman, *hew mii*, meaning "see the bear.") Person B,
 forever attentive, knows that words are deceptive: although A said one
 thing, he was really *thinking* of, and expects B to be *thinking* of, its rhymed
 phonemic inversion, which is vulgar or insulting. (Although the man said
 to her, *hew mii*, he was really thinking of *men kii*, meaning "your vulva
 smells.") Person B picks up the cue and responds with a statement that
 sounds equally innocuous but which when mentally inverted is just as
 scatological. The game continues until one of the parties gives up, where-
 upon the conversation returns with laughter to its original concerns. It
 must be emphasized that although this game is phrased in terms of a verbal
 contest, its purpose is not to best the other person but to work out with him
 or her a dialogue entertaining to both.

524 Sometimes these games arise and die out so quickly that it is difficult
 522 even for other, nonparticipating Siamese to spot them. The particular
 123 example cited here is one that has become almost part of the folklore of
 conversational gambits. However, what delights many of the villagers is the
 unpredictability of these patterns. On one occasion, I unwittingly juxtaposed
 a few English phonemes that had two informants and my assistant
 literally rolling on the floor with laughter. We were talking about the

[123] wide currency in Bangkok newspapers during 1956. It seemed that a husband was
 [571] waiting outside a brothel to escort his wife, one of the prostitutes, home. She was
 [572] busy with a customer. The husband called to her, telling her to hurry. She called
 back, saying that she would be through shortly. A few minutes later, he called again,
 and once more she said that she would be coming along. Finally, the husband went
 in and shot both his wife and her customer "because I lost my patience." When I
 told this story to several villagers, I was the only one who chuckled. Most of them
 either commented on the sadness of the story or said the husband was stupid for
 killing the family breadwinner.

⁹ In American stinky-pinky, people try to guess the rhymed equivalents of abstract definitions. Thus, if person A says, "I am thinking of a 'cadaverous Marxist,'" person B might say, "a dead red." The Thai version differs from its American cousin in that it is not only unspoken but is not really a parlor game. The tonal, monosyllabic nature of the Thai language probably is an important preconditioning factor here. (See also Haas 1951 and 1957 for illustrations of other kinds of verbal play.)

various kinds of ants living in Thailand and the United States. (Such are the topics that interest villagers.) The villagers wanted to know the English names for small red ants, normal black ones, and the large, rusty colored variety that are indigenous to the tropics. I named the first two with no difficulty. For the third, I said simply, "a giant ant." The assistant, turning to one of the informants, first gave the literal Thai equivalent of "giant," and then, as if this were the funniest thing he had heard that week, began to repeat, "giant, gi-ant, gi-ant." In a few seconds, they were all bursting with laughter.

Different, yet part of the same psychological constellation, is the whole complex of behaviors associated with the term, *sawug*. *Sawug* is usually translated into English simply as "fun." However, this translation conveys little of the motivational significance of the term. Essentially, *sawug* is a quality inherent in all situations which are not only fun but also emotionally worthwhile. In fact, these two states are often thought of as reciprocals of one another. An activity that is novel, diverting, or that can be done comfortably, is *sawug dii* (good fun); one that is tedious, over-demanding, that lacks the opportunity for frivolity, is not *sawug* and should be avoided. Harvesting rice in cooperative work groups, attending a ceremonial, participating in an election (see Phillips 1958: 45-46), or even taking something as outlandish as a Sentence Completion Test are all *sawug*. (The unifying elements of these diverse activities are either their novelty or the fact that they involve the presence of relatively large numbers of people but require no genuine interchange with them.) On the other hand, going into the army or working for a demanding superior are not *sawug*.

The importance of *sawug* is that it provides the villagers with a standard of value, a measure of how much they wish to commit themselves to a particular activity. The role of this standard should not be underestimated. Villagers who have taken a job in the city, often involving a time-bound daily routine or continuous, sustained attention to a task (work in a small factory, for example) frequently return to the village explaining that they quit "because it wasn't *sawug*. How can you work on a job if there is never any time for fun?" Foreign employers, with their greater concern for the job than with the person who does it and with their annoying tendency to be *cuu cii* (compulsive, fussy, exacting) are a particular target for this indictment, although this is usually based on hearsay rather than personal experience. On the other hand, villagers will often take on free of charge a major job (for example, helping a neighbor build a house) precisely because it is *sawug*. Although there are other considerations operating here—creating or repaying a personal obligation, doing a *bunkhun* ("a goodness") for a neighbor—the "*sawug-ful*" aspects of the task are always

since even the most novel activities eventually become routine or stale, it is obviously impossible for all one's hours to be animated with *sanug*. From a total time perspective, many of the villagers' activities are of course either "sanug-fully" fallow or "sanug-fully" short-lived. To a large extent, this paradox is resolved *subjectively* by the short-term time perspective of the villagers. This is the second major point to be noted about *sanug*, that is, *sanug* reflects a more generalized tendency on the part of the villagers to concern themselves with activities that require only brief time commitments or whose effects are immediately forthcoming. Bang Chaners are not an impatient people in an active, negative sense, but they do have difficulty in attending to tasks that demand from them a sense of compulsiveness or staying power. They will often drop demanding tasks right in the middle once they have recognized that the work is taking longer than originally expected. What is striking is that they will do this with apparently no sense of frustration over not having fulfilled their aims and with no regret over having wasted their time. It is as if their original purposes had simply become irrelevant, and they had gone on to other things. This is precisely the attitude, for example, surrounding the construction of the unusable road referred to earlier leading from the Minburi Highway to the Bang Chan school. After devoting considerable labor to building the high mound that would form the foundation of the road, villagers lost interest when they were unable to obtain funds for its surfacing. Since no one was ever interested in maintaining it, the road now lies in the middle of a rice field, rutted and pitted; much of the foundation has sunk back to the level of the adjacent fields. However, no villager has ever considered the road a fiasco or "folly"; it was just something done in the past and has since been forgotten. The road project might be revived in the future, but from the villagers' point of view that too is irrelevant. The point is that *sanug*, with its emphasis on novelty and diversion, is expressive of this same underlying time orientation. In the villagers' way of thinking, no activity is really worth doing unless it has the potentiality for fun.

Another expression of the villagers' concern with play, related in some respects to what will be discussed in the next section, is their preoccupation with humorous topics of conversation. For the most part, they enjoy hearing and telling stories with a "banana peel" twist: of a husband who is caught by his wife sleeping with another woman; of an individual who, through his failure to take heed, is cheated out of his money. Such stories of course always concern other people, not those immediately present. Too, stories that combine whimsy and the supernatural—for example, of a "super-dog" that can find buried treasure or foretell the future—elicit laughter, although often with a tinge of apprehension that the stories may be true. However, what is most impressive about these and similar stories is the amount of time given to them.

521 The sociological context of a story-telling is probably what is most
 • 522 important here. Bang Chan is a community where other than cultivating
 538 the single rice crop and attending to daily household chores and religious
 activities, the villagers realistically have little else to do but talk to each
 other. This is clearly not an inevitable attribute of the peasant condition,
 but it is true of Bang Chan where little attention is given to such creative
 leisure activities as craftsmanship, music, and art, and where there is little
 occupational specialization. In fact, probably more time is given to gos-
 siping than to any other single waking activity except daydreaming. Bang
 Chaners talk of many things, serious as well as lighthearted: the price of
 rice, religion, gambling, the doings of "big people," family disputes, and the
 like. However, by far one of the largest segments of their total conversa-
 tional repertoire is given over to "funny" stories. Of course, no story is ever
 exclusively humorous in nature; all communication is inherently multi-
 dimensional, and even the funniest story has a substantive, non-humorous
 message. However, if stories may be judged by their behavioral effects
 (laughter) irrespective of their intellectual content, then the function of a
 major part of Bang Chan gossip is amusement.¹⁰

538 The motivations for the selection of banana peel type stories are more
 154 complex. In part, the choice seems prompted by a "there but for the grace of
 God go I . . ." mentality. As suggested earlier, Bang Chaners have a
 keenly developed sense of the possible: to them, this is a world where
 anything, not only the probable or the predictable, can happen. The
 banana peel story, with its emphasis on the painfully ludicrous and ex-
 treme, is a perfect representation of such an uncertain world. Its beauty is

[123] ¹⁰ During the early stage of field work, I attempted to do systematic naturalistic
 [114] observations of these gossip groups. The purpose was simply to identify the kinds of
 [126] topics uppermost in the villagers' minds and the modes of interaction that most fre-
 quently developed during the sessions; it was hoped that the latter information might
 be related to the psychological test materials of the discussants. As a precisely de-
 signed and executed project, the effort, however, was dropped after a short time. For
 one thing, it was too difficult for two observers to record the *simultaneous* verbal and
 kinesthetic interaction of several people without the aid of a self-powered tape re-
 corder and with the added burden of having to strain the material through the trans-
 lation process. The task was further complicated by the fact that the membership of
 these groups continually changed as people would leave and enter the conversations.
 Also the groups would often break down into smaller sub-groups. Most important was
 the sheer multidimensionality of the conversation: any one utterance could simul-
 taneously be funny, aggressive, boastful, carry practical information, etc. However,
 enough information was culled from these early attempts and later less ambitious ones
 to prompt the statements presented here. It is this writer's observation that one of the
 reasons behind the success of so much of the "small group" research conducted in the
 United States is that the groups studied have been *problem solving* or *task-oriented*,
 rather than simple gossip groups. The highly functional nature of the former has
 provided built-in constraints on the freedom of action permitted the discussants, and
 has made observational problems comparatively easier to deal with.

538 ("Who knows what he was in earlier lives and what powers he brought
231 with him into this one?"), there is enough reality about the tale to make people want to listen. Moreover, it is wish-fulfilling fantasy; people laugh because reality has been outraged, but with a lingering desire that it really could be.

522 The kinds of stories outlined above do not exhaust the villagers' stock of
(538) conversational humor. There are also tall stories without the supernatural touch, broad burlesques, "dirty" jokes,¹² and the countless epigrams that work their way into almost any conversation; the last are not so much topics of conversation as they are means of punctuating a point. However, enough has been said to indicate that in its cognitive stylization and social psychological purposes, Bang Chan humor is not too different from Western humor. It is rather the content, frequency, and evaluation of the humor that is so distinctive. That the content should be distinctive is of course self-evident, since all humor is rooted in the implicit and familiar premises of workaday, cultural life. In fact the very essence of a joke is seeing the culturally familiar in an entirely new light. This may help to explain, incidentally, why it is always so painfully self-defeating to try "to explain" the content of a joke: its entire effect is dependent on the listener's implicit

522 ¹² Sexual and scatological humor in Bang Chan pose some special problems. On the
831 one hand, because villagers take such a matter-of-fact approach to sex, there are
538 actually few jokes and stories that aim explicitly at being titillating or risqué. For
(081) most Bang Chaners, sex is something to be experienced and enjoyed in private, not
snickered about barracks-style; there is no *samug* in talking about sex (although there
may be in playing with tabooed words, especially if cleverly done). Also, villagers
seem to lack any interest in lewdness for its own sake. Not only Bang Chan, but Thai
culture in general, is striking for its relative absence of attempts to edify sex: there is
nothing in Thai literature or art, for example, approximating the exaggerated bawdi-
ness of Rabelais or the graphic sensuality of the kind of sculpture found at Khajuraho
and Konarak in India.

On the other hand, sexual situations are very often used as vehicles for portraying the foibles and stupidities of people. Villagers particularly enjoy stories of individuals of either sex who devise ways for seducing the unsuspecting, or of individuals who manage to outwit their spouses while philandering with their lovers; the more complex their machinations, the more amusing the stories. However, it is the social psychological, not the sexual, dimensions of these tales that form the major bases of their appeal.

Finally, it should be noted that villagers tend to distinguish between what could be called "genital" and "anal" modes of humor. The latter type has considerably fewer taboos associated with it. Thus, whereas most villagers would avoid going into descriptive detail in reporting the physical aspects of a tale of sexual conquest, they would have few qualms about discussing (and often with acoustical detail) such things as people who pass air in public or who otherwise get themselves into compromising anal situations. (Interestingly, J. Marvin Brown in his linguistic work with Thai informants, often including female university students, reports in a personal communication that he encountered difficulty in obtaining the various Thai terms for sexual organs and acts, but that the terms for anal and excretory behavior were given with little hesitation.)

recognition of the incongruity being portrayed; to have to explicate the way the familiar has been violated is to miss the whole point. Yet the very problem with which the anthropological investigator is characteristically faced is his unfamiliarity with the culturally implicit. His major intellectual task in fact is to make explicit that which is implicitly held by his informants. The only way to deal with this paradox is either to consider humor a special case of anthropological investigation, leave the content alone, and focus principally on forms and functions, or do a humorless exegesis and be prepared for disappointments. As indicated earlier, this writer greatly prefers the former alternative.

Why the frequency and value of the humor should be so different is difficult to say. That the villagers devote considerably more time to this mode of play and place considerably higher value on it than do most Occidentals is clear, especially from the pejorative comments of Westerners who are so disturbed by it. One possible reason may be the simple lack (compared to Occidentals) of time-consuming, functional tasks in the village; that is, given the villagers' definitions of things that have to be done during the cycle of daily activity, there is just more time available to them to be "frittered away" in amusing conversation. However, this negative explanation is at best only a partial solution since many people who have "little to do" manage to make busy work for themselves (in a diagnostic, not deprecating, sense); also, granted the fact that Bang Chaners have time to talk of many things, it does not explain why such a large portion of this time should be given over to humor. Another possible reason was indicated earlier: comedy provides an outlet for certain feelings that otherwise are denied direct expression or are a source of anxiety in the culture. The higher frequency of humor is a function of the degree of prohibition or anxiety, which in the case of some feelings—aggression, for example—is very high indeed. Since, as has probably been detected, much of the villagers' humor does revolve around aggressive situations, there is clearly some cogency to this approach. There is a third possible reason for the villagers' greater concern with humor. Humor, with its emphasis on the exaggerated, the incongruous, and unpredictable is, from a psychological point of view, essentially a form of new experience. In fact, it, and the real life situations to which it refers, are "invention" in the purest meaning of the terms: the breaking through of tried and established patterns of expectation. But people in different cultures look for their new experience, or express their inventiveness, in different ways. There is no inherent necessity (a consideration often overlooked by scholars concerned with culture change) for inventiveness to be expressed primarily through technological, economic, or sociological forms. It might well be, as Keesing has suggested (1960), that in many cultures the favoured modes for expressing the

- 521 innovative impulses are recreative or aesthetic, either in content or form.
• 522 Simply stated, the reason Bang Chaners may spend more time than West-
182 erners in telling amusing stories to each other is because they feel they are
gaining something new and worthwhile from the experience.

Politeness: A Social Cosmetic

- 57 It has been previously noted that the villagers' ubiquitous politeness appears in several different forms: sometimes it is associated with a genial interest in others or a concern over their welfare and comfort; at other times it is used as a means of handling one's anxiety over the intentions of others or one's uncertainty over the nature and purpose of the relationship; and at other times, it is used as a means of impressing others or getting in their good graces. The term "social cosmetic" is used here because it embraces at one time all these varying usages. A cosmetic not only makes one appear more attractive and conceals one's blemishes, real or imagined, but permits one to deal with others more easily and comfortably. The last consideration is in part a direct consequence of the first two, that is, a person who feels he is attractive to others will in all likelihood be more relaxed in his relationships with them. However, it is probably also a product of the conventionalized, relatively explicit interactional "frame"¹³ that the very wearing of the cosmetic creates. The cosmetic indicates that regardless of his basic intentions, the person will conduct himself properly and agreeably; it defines the presence of and prompts conformity to certain behavioral rituals which simplify for the participants the kinds of behavior they may express. In a sense, the cosmetic of politeness represents one of the most "civilized" modes of social interaction: it is based on a fundamental concern with structuring one's behavior (again, irrespective of intentions) so as least to disturb others and thus permit them to act in socially easy, uncomplicated ways. Further, it stresses respect for the dignity and psychological integrity of others. The actual topic of conversation or non-verbal ritual that links the participating individuals together may be either meaningful or inconsequential, but that is essentially irrelevant when compared to the fact that the respect the participants feel for each other is being communicated. In

¹³ This term is somewhat akin to what Goffman (1959: 22-24); in his attempt to analyze behavior in a dramaturgical framework, calls the "setting" or the "scenic aspects" of the interactional situation. However, Goffman's terms refer explicitly to the physical layout—the furniture, decor, and the like—of the behavioral situation rather than to the psychological "setting" that is created by the behavior of the participating individuals. On the other hand, his term, "personal front," refers exclusively to the attributes of individuals, rather than to the situational definitions that they create. The term "frame" used here refers to the psychological setting which is created by the behavior of individuals and which defines for all participants the nature of the situation.